THE ENGLISH REFORMATION AND THE LAITY

Gloucestershire, 1540–1580

CAROLINE LITZENBERGER

West Virginia University

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Introduction

In the summer of 1551, in the middle of the reign of Edward VI, the churchwardens of St Michael's, Gloucester, paid two labourers 4s 'for the cariege of yerthe owte of the churche' to lower the floor where the altar had stood and prepare the place for the new wooden communion table required by Edwardian Protestantism. Two years later St Michael's installed a new altar, having paid 6s 8d to 'the halyer for xiij lodes of earthe for [raising] the said altur' as required by the return to Catholicism under Mary I, Edward's half-sister and successor. Here we see a local parish responding promptly and conscientiously to the requirements of the successive religious policies of the Crown. This return to Catholicism may have been the most abrupt and dramatic policy shift, but since the early 1530s official policy in England had swung back and forth between various forms of the old and the new religion. In that earlier decade, the break with Rome, the prohibition of selected traditional beliefs and practices, and the dissolution of the monasteries signalled a move away from the theology and discipline of the pre-Reformation church. Meanwhile, the centrality of scripture in preaching, worship and piety determined the nature of the newly emerging Henrician Church. This was not, however, the beginning of a steady move toward Protestantism akin to the inexorable rise of the waters behind a dam after the flood gates have been closed, but more like the ebb and flow of the waters of an ocean, at least until the 1570s. Hence, the religious world of the English laity was periodically disrupted, sometimes in sudden and wrenching ways. One month people were being urged to make pilgrimages to shrines which housed holy relics; the next month the relic was gone. One Easter they were to erect and watch the Easter sepulchre; the next year that practice was prohibited. One Sunday the service was in Latin and the next week it was in English. Altars were removed, floors lowered, wall paintings whitewashed and elaborate vestments eliminated. Then after a few short years, the floors were raised, altars put back, and elaborate vestments resurrected. The process of removal and simplification would then be repeated again in another few years, but this time changes

would be introduced more slowly and, at least at first, less definitively. Thus, from the early 1530s to the early 1580s (from the middle of the reign of Henry VIII to the middle of the reign of Elizabeth I), the laity experienced a series of major upheavals. Some would welcome the new religion each time it was promoted; others would rejoice in every swing back toward the old. The anguish experienced by those who were trying to be obedient subjects and faithful Christians must have been excruciating.

Both Tessa Watt and Christopher Haigh have asserted that lay religion during this period was complex, as indeed it was.[1] When individuals are required to deal with change they respond in a variety of ways very similar to the responses one might have to a death: there is denial, resistance and anger before there can be acceptance. Of course, people's responses to change varied dramatically, depending on their experience, knowledge, preferences and personalities. In the case of religious change this is especially true. Thus some parishioners were delighted by the introduction of aspects of Protestantism, while others regretted the loss of traditional religion. Meanwhile, still others were angry and impatient, feeling that reform never went far enough. In addition, as the experiences of continuing shifts in official religion gave way to sustained periods with a particular set of beliefs and practices, people became more familiar with the new and began to accept it more readily. Such acceptance would, however, take time.

Only by investigating the religion of the laity can we see clearly how official policies played in the pews, and historians of the English Reformation are only now beginning to address such issues as we move into what might be described as the 'third phase' in the recent historiography of religion in sixteenth-century England. The first phase began with A. G. Dickens's work on pre-Elizabethan Protestantism and Patrick Collinson's examination of Elizabethan Puritanism. These provided the impetus for a number of local studies of the promotion of Protestantism which concentrated on diocesan administrations and the local gentry, while exploring the means of advancement of the new religion, and the speed and effects of such reform.[2] This approach, with its concentration of the identification of

[1] Haigh, *Reformations*, pp. 18, 285–95, *passim*; Watt, *Cheap Print*, pp. 324–8, *passim*.

[2] A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York 1509–1559* (1959; reprint, London, 1982); Dickens, *Reformation*; P. Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (1967; reprint, Oxford, 1990); J. E. Oxley, *The Reformation in Essex to the Death of Mary* (Manchester, 1965); R. B. Manning, *Religion and Society in Elizabethan Sussex: a Study of the Enforcement of the Religious Settlement, 1558–1603* (Leicester and Bristol, 1969); Clark, *Society*; J. F. Davis, *Heresy and Reformation in the South-East of England, 1520–1559* (Royal Historical Studies, London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1983); W. J. Sheils, *The Puritans in the Diocese of Peterborough, 1558–1610* (Northampton Record Society, vol. XXX, Northampton, 1979).

Protestants was challenged by Christopher Haigh in his study of the Reformation in Lancashire. His subsequent debate with Professor Dickens concerning the speed and catalysts of reform ushered in the second historiographical phase.[3] However, even this later phase was dependent on a clear delineation being made between Protestants and Catholics, and it is difficult to characterise accurately the actions, let alone the faith, of either individuals or parishes in terms of such strict dichotomies.

Of course, recent historians did not invent the concept of religious dichotomies. Rather, they have followed the lead of religious leaders in sixteenth-century England. Reformers referred to the pope as Antichrist and labelled as superstitious the traditional public rituals and private acts of piety. Meanwhile, those promoting the old faith characterised many of the beliefs and practices of the new religion as heretical. Defining or representing the self by demonising the 'Other' may have been an aspect of the developing awareness of the individual in early-modern England, but its institutional antecedents can be found in early Christianity.[4] Then, as the church developed, so too did the need for a clearer definition of orthodox belief. One of the primary means of achieving this goal was to define orthodoxy in terms of what it was not and to label that 'Other' as heresy.[5] As the reformers strove to re-establish the purity of the early 'true' church, they, along with the defenders of traditional religion, also adopted this strategy. Historians, it may be said, have merely been accepting and using the religious paradigms perceived and described by the articulate proponents of the various orthodoxies within sixteenth-century English religion. However, these rigid religious divisions do not necessarily reflect the faith actually practised in homes, parishes and even cathedrals across England, and more current historiography reflects that reality.

Moving beyond the Haigh–Dickens debate, historians are now investigating the impact of the Reformation more generally by exploring a myriad of topics and admitting the possibility of a more complex picture of the past. In particular, the ways in which the new religion and society acted

[3] C. Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1975). The debate between Haigh and Dickens is defined in two articles: A. G. Dickens, 'The Early Expansion of Protestantism in England 1520–1558', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 78 (1987), pp. 187–222; C. Haigh, 'The Recent Historiography of the English Reformation', *HJ* 25 (1982), pp. 995–1007, also printed in *Reformation Revised*, pp. 19–33. Cf. J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford, 1984); Whiting, *Blind Devotion*.

[4] S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (London and Chicago, IL, 1980), pp. 1–114, *passim*.

[5] For further discussion of the interplay between heresy and orthodoxy in early Christianity, see W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. R. A. Kraft and G. Kodel (Philadelphia, PA, 1971). For further discussion of the use of the constructs of heresy and orthodoxy in defining belief systems, see L. R. Kurtz, 'The Politics of Heresy', *American Journal of Sociology* 88 (1983), pp. 1085–115.

upon and transformed each other has increasingly attracted the attention of scholars, as have the dynamics of the implementation of the new faith and the nature of Marian and Elizabethan Catholicism and its traditional pre-Reformation antecedent.[6] This study enters the historiographical discussion at this point, but re-directs the focus. Rather than asking about the progress of Protestantism or the effects of reform on pre-Reformation lay piety, it examines the existing faith in its many shapes and forms, allowing for a wide range of religious beliefs.

This work focuses on the people and parishes of one particular western county, Gloucestershire, and by so doing it is able to accommodate and describe in detail a much more diverse and complex religious scene than could be depicted by a study encompassing the entire kingdom. Furthermore, it reveals much that can be attributed to human nature and to the inefficiencies inherent in the enforcement of the established religion throughout the realm. Thus, while personalities and specific religious beliefs of key individuals, including bishops, priests and lay leaders, certainly influenced particular responses to individual policies, and the conservative nature of most of the residents of Gloucestershire created a climate which was generally resistant to the new religion, similar broadly complex patterns of beliefs and practices could probably be found all over England. Each county or region might have found its religious centre at a different point along the spectrum of beliefs, but diversity rather than uniformity would be the watchword of lay religion in England, at least during the forty to fifty years of tumultuous change which characterised the English Reformation.

The successive swings in official policy between traditional and reformed religion, and the conflicting characteristics of the bishops of Gloucester would have had some impact on the laity of the diocese, both corporately and individually. Gloucestershire has nearly the same boundaries as the diocese of Gloucester, which was created in 1541 and endowed with income derived from the dissolution of the monasteries, most notably from St Peter's Abbey in the city of Gloucester. Over the next forty years of dramatic change in official religious policy, the diocese had four bishops with similarly diverse sets of beliefs and administrative styles: the con-

[6] D. Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London, 1989); Watt, *Cheap Print*; C. Haigh, 'The Continuity of Catholicism in the English Reformation', *P&P* 93 (1981), pp. 37–69, also printed in *Reformation Revised*, pp. 176–208; C. Haigh, 'The Church of England, the Catholics and the People' in *The Reign of Elizabeth I*, ed. C. Haigh (1984; reprint, Basingstoke and London, 1991), pp. 195–219; J. Bossy, 'The Character of Elizabethan Catholicism', *P&P* 21 (1962), pp. 39–59; J. Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* (London, 1975); P. McGrath, 'Elizabethan Catholicism: a Reconsideration', *JEH* 35 (1984), pp. 414–28; Duffy, *Stripping*.

forming and conformable John Wakeman, former prior of Tewkesbury Abbey; the radical and energetic Zwinglian Protestant, John Hooper; the highly respected Catholic, James Brookes; and the scholarly, conservative and enigmatic Richard Cheyney. Elsewhere in the realm the laity would similarly have felt the effects of the varied beliefs and talents of individuals serving on the episcopal bench.[7] However, the piety and practices of individuals and parishes would not necessarily have conformed to the directives or religious preferences of their superiors.

During the years following the publication of the key historical works by Professors Dickens and Collinson, many historians have done research on particular regions of England.[8] However, religion in sixteenth-century Gloucestershire has received little attention.[9] Three studies have concentrated on John Hooper, Bishop of Gloucester from 1551 to 1553, while three others have examined isolated aspects of the nonconforming laity. F. D. Price focused on Bishop Hooper and his diocesan administration.[10] Following on from Price, two other historians have also concentrated on Hooper, this time in an examination of his theology.[11] To the degree that

[7] For further discussion of the episcopate and the Reformation, see P. Collinson, 'Episcopacy and Reform in England in the Later Sixteenth Century', in *Studies in Church History*, ed. G. J. Cuming (Leiden, 1966), vol. III, pp. 91–125; R. B. Manning, 'The Crisis of Episcopal Authority during the reign of Elizabeth I', *JBS* 11 (1971), pp. 1–25; R. Houlbrooke, 'The Protestant Episcopate 1547–1603: the Pastoral Contribution', in *Church and Society in England, Henry VIII to James I*, ed. F. Heal and R. O'Day (London, 1977), pp. 78–98.

[8] Brigden, *London*; MacCulloch, *Suffolk*; M. C. Skeeters, *Community and Clergy: Bristol and the Reformation c. 1530–c. 1570* (Oxford, 1993); Whiting, *Blind Devotion*.

[9] The social and political history of the county during the sixteenth century has similarly been neglected, the concentration being on the town rather than the county and focusing on either the late-medieval period or the late sixteenth century and beyond: R. A. Holt, 'Gloucester: an English Provincial Town during the Later Middle Ages' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1987); R. A. Holt, 'Gloucester in the Century after the Black Death', in *The English Medieval Town: a Reader in English Urban History, 1200–1540*, ed. R. A. Holt and G. Rosser (London and New York, 1990), pp. 141–59; P. Clark, '"The Ramoth-Gilead of the Good": Urban Change and Political Radicalism at Gloucester 1540–1640', in *The English Commonwealth, 1547–1640*, ed. P. Clark, A. G. R. Smith and N. Tyack (Leicester, 1979), pp. 167–87.

[10] F. D. Price, 'The Commission for Ecclesiastical Causes for the Dioceses of Bristol and Gloucester, 1574', *TBGAS* 59 (1937), pp. 61–184; F. D. Price, 'Gloucester Diocese under Bishop Hooper', *TBGAS* 60 (1938), pp. 51–151; F. D. Price, 'An Elizabethan Church official – Thomas Powell, Chancellor of Gloucester Diocese', *The Church Quarterly Review* 128 (1939), pp. 94–112; F. D. Price, 'The Administration of the Diocese of Gloucester 1547–1579' (unpublished BLitt thesis, University of Oxford, 1939); F. D. Price, 'The Abuses of Excommunication and the Decline of Ecclesiastical Discipline under Queen Elizabeth', *EHR* 225 (1942), pp. 106–15; F. D. Price, 'Elizabethan Apparitors in the Diocese of Gloucester', *The Church Quarterly Review* 134 (1942), pp. 37–55; F. D. Price, 'Bishop Bullingham and Chancellor Blackleech: a Diocese Divided', *TBGAS* 91 (1972), pp. 175–98. (A copy of Price's thesis is also available for consultation in the Gloucestershire Record Office.)

[11] W. M. S. West, 'John Hooper and the Origins of Puritanism' (a summary in English of the unpublished PhD thesis with the same title from the University of Zurich), Dr Williams's

lay religion has been investigated in the diocese, the scholars involved have focused exclusively on either radical Protestantism or Catholicism. Thus Kenneth Powell looked at the activities of radical Protestant lay people before 1540, and Patrick McGrath and Francis Moore then concentrated on Elizabethan Catholicism, beginning in the 1560s.[12] The present work is broader than these in two ways: it looks at all aspects of lay religion, and it examines the entire period from the 1530s to the 1580s.

Furthermore, this study approaches some sources in innovative ways. As with most local studies of early-modern English religion, this work uses parish, diocesan and state records, plus observations of surviving parish buildings and decorations dating from the sixteenth century. However, it relies more heavily than most on the analysis of lay people's wills, both elite and non-elite. Additionally, the methodology used to examine the wills is both innovative and complex.[13] Sixteenth-century English wills were typically divided into three sections, each of which may contain clues to the religion of the testator: the bequest of the soul, the bequest of the body, and the bequest of goods or possessions. Analyses of the religious implications of the last two types of legacies are fairly straightforward. Soul bequests (which are also called religious preambles or statements of faith) must be approached with care. During the past two or three decades historians have been quite concerned about the reliability of the religious information contained in these documents. In particular, they have focused on the influence of the scribes who wrote the wills and on the implications of the use of pre-existing formulaic preambles. It is now evident that scribes often offered testators a choice of formulas from which to chose, thus minimising scribal influence and control in many instances. In addition, we now recognise that the twentieth-century need for originality in order to authenticate self-expression did not exist in the sixteenth century. Rather, Renaissance ideas of authorship pertained, and a testator would have been making a stronger statement of belief by choosing a formula others would recognise and understand than by creating his or her own idiosyncratic preamble. Historians have also had difficulty with sampling and categor-

Library, MS P.4851; W. M. S. West, 'John Hooper and the Origins of Puritanism', *The Baptist Quarterly* 15 (1954), pp. 346–68; 16 (1955), pp. 22–46, 67–88; D. G. Newcome, 'The Life and Theological Thought of John Hooper, Bishop of Gloucester and Worcester, 1551–1553' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1990).

[12] Powell, 'Beginnings'; Powell, 'Social Background'; P. McGrath, 'Gloucestershire and the Counter-Reformation in the Reign of Elizabeth I', *TBGAS* 88 (1969), pp. 5–28; F. A. Moore, '"The Bruised Reed" (Is. 42:3): a Study of the Catholic Remnant in England, 1558–1603, with Special Reference to Gloucestershire' (unpublished MPhil thesis, University of London, 1990).

[13] See Appendix A for a more complete discussion of the methodology used in this study.

ising wills, and the methodology developed for this study is concerned with that aspect of their analysis.

For this investigation of lay beliefs in Gloucestershire a systematic sample of approximately 2,600 wills was selected, which was of sufficient size to be substantially representative of all those who wrote wills between 1540 and 1580 in the county. The preamble texts were analysed to determine the salvation theology they expressed. Over 300 different preamble texts were identified and consolidated under seventeen distinct descriptive headings. These headings were subsequently combined into three general categories: traditional or Catholic; evangelical or Protestant; and ambiguous. The ambiguous group comprised those statements of faith which could have been used in good conscience by anyone without distorting their salvation theology. The word, 'ambiguous' was chosen to reflect the fact that allowing for multiple meanings seems to have been the goal of many who employed preambles from this category. Finally, the codified preambles, further identified by date, region and sex, were analysed statistically to identify trends and determine the significance of observed differences. The results of the analysis of the wills were then used in combination with detailed studies of selected parishes and broader research into state and diocesan court records and other miscellaneous documents to produce a representation of lay religion in sixteenth-century Gloucestershire.

This study, then, uses the story of religious change in one county to gain insight into the experience of the laity of Tudor England through multiple shifts in official policy; most notably by looking at all the laity, no matter what their religious preferences. Frequently the spotlight of historical interest has been directed exclusively at Protestantism, neglecting other aspects of sixteenth-century religion, which have then been lost in the shadows. In particular, the survival of traditional religion has been hidden from view, while the light has been so bright that it flattened the image, obscuring the variations inherent in the multiple manifestations of the new religion. A similar problem has emerged when the centre-stage has been dominated by those who preferred the old religion. A further difficulty arises when one assumes that clear distinctions can be drawn between different religious preferences. Using such sharp distinctions hampers the accuracy of representations of the past, in that it requires religion to be trimmed of its complexities and diversities in order to fit into such strictly delineated categories. It is difficult accurately to characterise the actions, let alone faith, of either individuals or parishes using such a rigid black and white paradigm. We must find ways to accommodate myriad shades of grey, as this study attempts to do. The present work also explores the reflexive, recursive ways in which the new religion and society acted upon

and transformed each other. In so doing, it shows that lay religion during the English Reformation was both complex and diverse, and that, while it changed over time, it did not necessarily change in the ways desired by those in authority.

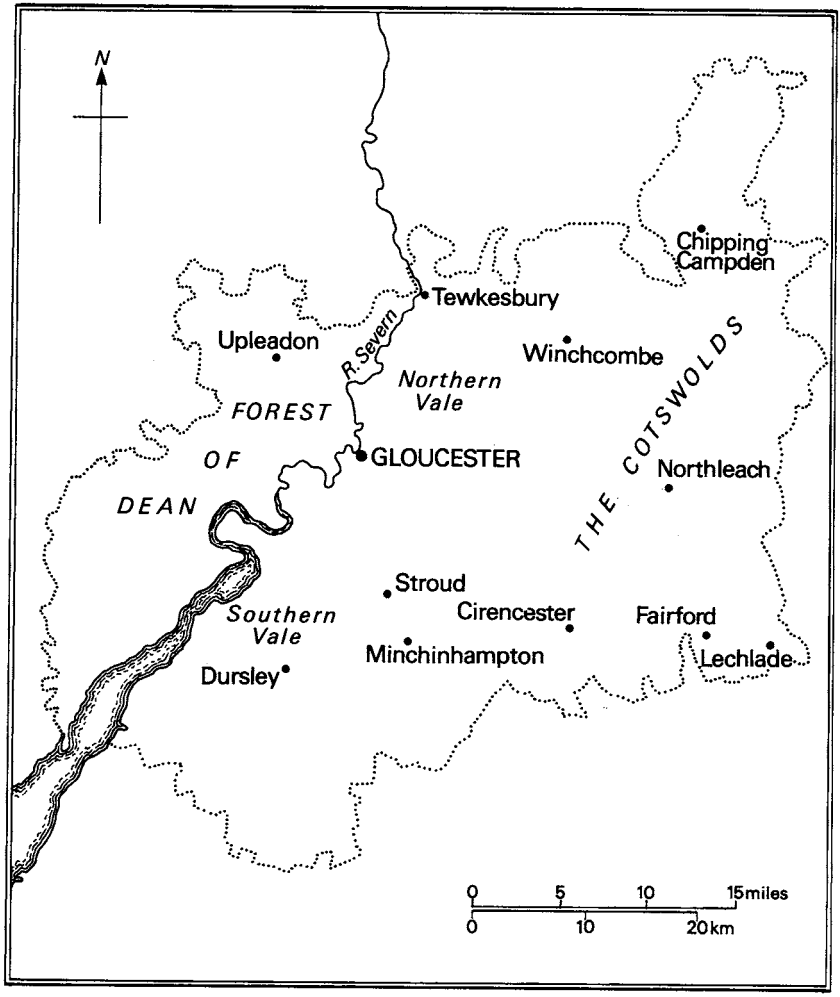

Figure 1.1 Map of Gloucestershire